

January 24, 2014

Dr. Thomas Frieden
Director
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333

The Honorable Gina McCarthy
Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Ariel Rios Building
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20460

Dear Director Frieden and Administrator McCarthy:

As West Virginia scientists and health professionals, we are writing to urge you to remove barriers that prevent agency scientists from sharing their expertise with the public.

On January 9, an unknown amount of 4-methylcyclohexanemethanol leaked from tanks at a Freedom Industries facility into the Elk River, just upstream from a treatment plant that provides water for 300,000 West Virginians. Since then, our communities have suffered with inadequate, and sometimes conflicting, information about both long term and short term risks of exposure to the chemical.¹

Part of the problem is that too little is known about this (and many other) chemicals that are used in industrial processes. Tens of thousands of chemicals in use today have never been evaluated by the EPA or any other government agency.²

That said, your agencies have repeatedly failed to adequately respond to questions from the public and the press.³ We deserve to be told what is known--and what is not known-- about the risks the chemical poses to human health as the disaster unfolds. If the government had been more forthcoming about what is not known about the leaked chemicals, citizens and local officials would have been able to make better choices about the actions needed to protect their families and communities. Some may have chosen to leave the area, others to make longer-term arrangements for alternative sources of water. Only an informed citizenry can make informed choices.

Unfortunately, government scientists have been notably absent from the public discussion. Both the Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention refused repeated interview requests for nearly a week.⁴ Further, CDC officials consistently failed to explain how the agency had arrived at a one-part-per-million threshold for the water to be considered safe.⁵ This is especially troubling in light of recent commitments by both of your agencies to transparency and accountability through developing and fully implementing policies that support scientific integrity and openness. Lack of access to government scientists can only lead to less trust in your agencies and more harm to the citizens of West Virginia.

Government scientists should be able to share their expertise with the public and the press without interference from other agency staff. While public affairs officers can play a coordinating role and should

¹ Ward Jr., Ken. "Use of water 'your decision,' Tomblin says." Charleston Gazette, January 20, 2014.

² "What is TSCA?" Safer Chemicals Healthy Families. Available at www.saferchemicals.org/resources/tsca.html. Accessed January 21, 2014.

³ Ward Jr., Ken. "CDC: W.Va. water crisis 'a dynamic and evolving event'." Charleston Gazette, January 16, 2014.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ward, Jr., Ken. "Experts: Not enough data to judge MCHM dangers." Charleston Gazette, January 17, 2014.

be kept aware of scientists' public statements, they should not act as gatekeepers that compromise our ability to understand the potential risks we are facing. This is especially true during emergency situations, when better access to scientific information can help prevent exposure and injury.

As scientists ourselves, we are particularly aware that our colleagues who work for the federal government can be a tremendous resource--but not if they are restricted from communicating with the public. We urge you to update your policies and practices to allow unfettered access to the scientists whose expertise can help prevent illness and injury. Our communities and our fellow citizens deserve no less.

Sincerely,

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